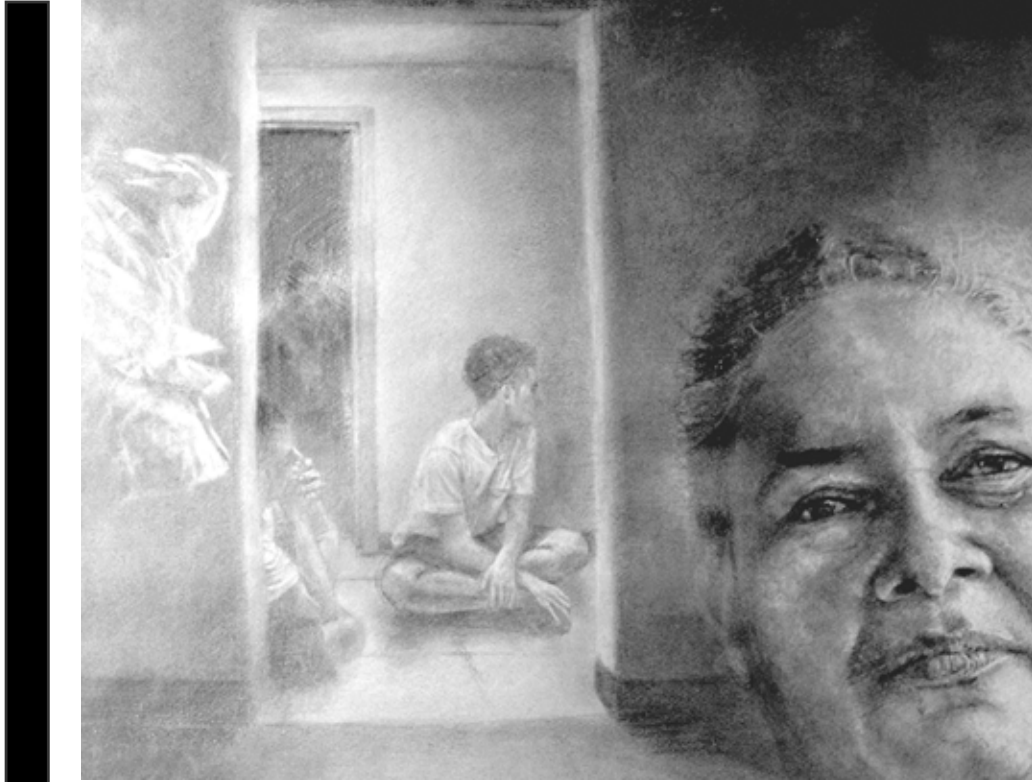


A PROPHETIC CALL No 4

COLOMBIAN PROTESTANT CHURCHES

DOCUMENT THEIR SUFFERING AND THEIR HOPE



Daniel Esquivia Zapata, *Desaparecidos* #3.

Executive Summary

A report on political violence against Colombian Protestant and Evangelical churches and their peace-building witness.

In 2008, Justapaz¹ and the Peace Commission of CEDECOL² documented political violence revealing 240 individual violations suffered by 158 individual church victims. In addition, trained program members recorded 31 collective violations against communities during that period. The sum of individual and collective violations resulted in a total of 2,285 victims.

1 Justapaz is the Christian Center for Justice, Peace and Nonviolent Action, a ministry of the Colombian Mennonite Church.

2 The Colombian Evangelical Council, or CEDECOL, is a federation representing approximately 70% of Colombia's Evangelical and Protestant Christian Population. The Restoration, Life and Peace Commission is also known as the Peace Commission.

For the third consecutive year, Colombian churches attributed more violations to the paramilitaries than to the guerrillas or Public Security Forces. Paramilitaries allegedly committed 120 individual violations against church victims, versus the 97 committed by the guerrilla groups, and 10 by the State.³ Through personal interviews with surviving victims, family, and community members, we registered death threats (115), displacements (81), and homicides (22) as the most frequently occurring violations.

The 2008 assassination of Pastor Justo Tunabalá and the disappearance of Pastor William Reyes illustrate the violence suffered by victims, as well as the difficulty in seeking justice in such cases. The Colombian army does not deny assassinating Pastor Justo Tunabalá; rather, he is falsely accused of being a guerrilla. His family was later intimidated by the Army. The persons responsible for Pastor William Reyes' disappearance are still unknown and no progress has been reported in investigations into the crime, despite energetic international political advocacy.

Collective displacements (10) of church communities further hint at the nearly invisible humanitarian crisis suffered by these victims of the armed conflict. Colombia tragically boasts the highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the western hemisphere, second only to Sudan in the world.

This brief summary illustrates that the Colombian government's repeated mantra of "FARC as public enemy number one" is an oversimplification of Colombia's protracted armed conflict. Many Colombians and international onlookers may be convinced by the government's simplified version of events, but life stories shared by Evangelical and Protestant church members expose a much more complex on-going armed conflict.

By being justice and peace, church communities condemn violence and invite participation in genuine alternatives. Their sacred yes – spoken through truth-telling and loving practices – provides signposts to a nonviolent, just solution to social inequalities and armed conflict. Churches are saying yes to the truth of personal narratives of persecuted victims that is denied by the government. Yes to justice that strives to make all things new. Yes to dialogue between warring parties instead of speaking only through the exchange of bullets.

Peacemaking churches that embody alternatives to war and take risks for reconciliation will show Colombia a way out of prolonged violent conflict.

The lasting solution to Colombia's internal conflict must be as nuanced, deliberate and protracted as the conflict itself. Based on local faith community experiences and the factors that cause and permit violence to continue, churches request specific changes in the practices and policies of Colombia, the United States, Canada and the European Union. They also speak directly to the armed groups, legal and illegal, carrying out the violence to encourage negotiated solutions to the armed conflicts that make up the great conflict tormenting Colombia's churches and people at this time.

3 In 13 cases there was no attribution.